

Robert Gordon University

Review of coherent provision and sustainability in further and higher education

Introduction

Robert Gordon University welcomes the opportunity to provide this contribution to the Scottish Funding Council's review of coherent provision and sustainability. In making this response, the University broadly supports the submissions made by both Universities Scotland and the Million Plus mission group. This contribution should therefore be read as a supplement to these submissions in particular areas where the University believes it makes a strong and distinctive contribution to the region's and Scotland's economic, social and cultural development. It also emphasises where universities which share both this mission and track record can contribute to the regional and national recovery in the years to come as our society and economy experiences profound challenges and changes.

RGU has a strategic mission to transform individuals and communities by providing demand-led teaching and research to contribute to economic, social and cultural development. It prides itself on its reputation for providing demand-led and professionally relevant courses. The university has a longstanding tradition of admitting students from all backgrounds based on their ability to succeed. The commitment of staff to the delivery of a high-quality learning environment is evidenced by the University's reputation for learning and teaching. Successive improvements in student satisfaction have led the University to be ranked 2nd university in the UK for overall satisfaction in 2020.¹ The University has maintained its high levels of graduate employability, being ranked 3rd university in the UK for employability in the recent Graduate Outcome survey.² These performances, consistently above the University's benchmarks, have resulted in RGU being one of very few Scottish universities to be awarded TEF Gold status. The university also seeks to contribute to the economic, social and cultural development of the region by supporting organisations to be more successful. It does this through a wide range of engagements with business from graduate apprenticeships, KTPs and use of innovation vouchers. The University's core curriculum and its work to support the economic development of the region makes a significant contribution to the skills agenda of the region and wider nation.

- 1. What do you think works well in the current further and higher education arrangements that we should keep in order to secure Scotland's inclusive social and economic recovery from the current pandemic? How can we best preserve and strengthen those features of education, research and innovation in Scotland that we most prize, in a very challenging funding environment?*

The Scottish higher education system provides highly-qualified graduates to make significant contributions to the social, cultural and economic life of the nation. Higher education is also a

¹ This is calculated using the same criteria as for UK university league tables – excluding private and small specialist institutions. It is worth noting that in terms of the Funding Council's Outcome Agreement measure for student satisfaction, which uses the difference between actual score in the overall satisfaction question and the benchmark, the University is ranked first in Scotland.

² This is calculated on the same basis as the former HESA performance indicator based on the old Destination of Leavers in Higher Education survey (whether significant interim study is included or excluded the University's ranking remains unchanged. Once again private and small specialist institutions are excluded as they would be in UK university league tables.

privilege which bestows significant benefits on the recipients of such education. Universities provide an incubator for innovation through applied research and knowledge exchange which can increase economic productivity. Beyond this economic impact, as civic institutions, universities make significant contributions to the social and cultural life of the regions they are located within. This contribution also enables universities to support the leaders of both today and tomorrow. All of these outcomes, important as they are currently, will become more critical in the recovery that follows the current pandemic.

At Robert Gordon University these strengths are based upon an agility in the manner in which the University responds to challenges and opportunities. Key aspects of the University's approach include:

- Provision of a professionally-relevant curriculum with work-related experience or placements – around 80% of the University's undergraduate courses have a significant work-related experience or placement. Such experiences also have significant value to companies, often meeting critical industry need to find new approaches. In recognition of globalisation over the last decade placements have been undertaken in 58 countries. These international experiences are further reinforced by study abroad partnerships in place with 24 countries across the world and over 100 institutions. This extensive placement programme undoubtedly contributes to the employability rates of the University's graduates.
- Strong relationships with professional and statutory bodies – recent developments include the Aberdeen Business School becoming the first business school in the world to achieve joint accreditation from the Association of MBAs and the Business Graduates Association. The university has embedded the Scottish Innovate Student Award across many of our Schools, with Gray's School of Art becoming the first art school in Scotland to be accredited. The University has also worked in partnership with the Scottish Ambulance Service to provide a regional approach to education and training for the profession, addressing the requirement for all new paramedic students to be education to degree-level.
- Close links with employers and businesses – the University seeks to ensure the relevance of its course provision by engagement with employers in the design, delivery and assessment of its courses. The approach the University has taken to the recruitment of graduate apprenticeships in offering work-based learning has enabled the University to gain a richer understanding of the needs of employers and organisations in upskilling and reskilling their workforces. These aspects have been strengthened by its Employability Plus initiative through which the University has maintained its strong reputation for the employability of its graduates. In the new Graduate Outcomes survey the University is ranked 3rd in the UK and top university in Scotland for the employment of its graduates. The University's reputation for graduate employability is further strengthened by the positive outcomes for graduates demonstrated in the Longitudinal Employment Outcomes data. In the most recent data for the Class of 2018, the university ranks in the top 3 institutions in Scotland for sustained employment across nine subject areas and is in the top 10 amongst all UK providers across six subject areas. In terms of earnings, the university ranks 1st in Scotland for median earnings one year after graduation across eight subject areas, appears in the top 5 for an additional three subject areas and is 1st in the UK for Health & Social Care.
- Enhancement of the learning experience – to ensure continual enhancement of our teaching provision and in partnership with the student body, the University engages in

the sector's enhancement themes with a rigorous focus on key metrics as part of our annual appraisal process. This has seen a steady increase in the University's continuation rate over the last decade – which is now sitting above the benchmark for the University. It has also seen strong increases in the National Student Survey (as mentioned earlier now ranked 2nd university in the UK).

- Strong and well-developed links with the college sector – there are examples of strong partnerships between colleges and universities in the tertiary education sector. These fruitful partnerships should not be weakened and undermined by a desire to multiply the number of paper partnerships which at best redistribute articulation numbers across institutions rather than grow numbers overall. The partnership between North East Scotland College and the University is a leading example in Scotland. This partnership is formalised through a unique arrangement whereby the College is recognised as an Associate College of the University. Illustrating the strength of this partnership, around 20% of the University's non-controlled undergraduate student numbers are students articulating with advanced standing and the majority of these are from the North East Scotland College. The university has the third largest number of articulating students with advanced standing in Scotland and is the university with the second highest proportion of articulating students articulating with advanced standing.³
- Expanding widening access – the University has a long tradition of expanding access to higher education, it has the eighth largest population of MD20 students in Scotland. The number of students who declare a disability has steadily increased year on year to 18.4% in 2019/20. Similarly, the proportion of Scottish-domiciled BME undergraduate entrants has continued to increase to 9.9%. For all of these measures the university is above the Scottish sector average and above a rate which would be representative of wider Scottish society.
- Recognition of research excellence – within Scotland research continues to be recognised as a fundamental characteristic of a university. While this remains the case, the funding of research excellence wherever it is found is a principle that should be retained.
- Dedicated support for knowledge exchange – the University has consistently been awarded high numbers of KTPs and its awards of innovation vouchers has expanded rapidly in the last two years. In the 2019/20 academic year the university has been awarded the largest number of innovation vouchers (28 vouchers plus 4 advanced vouchers). Despite the current lockdown the university has almost doubled its Outcome Agreement target for the award of innovation vouchers. The university holds the largest number of KTPs in the north of Scotland and fourth ranked in Scotland.
- Delivery of graduate apprenticeships – the University has been committed to work-based delivery of graduate apprenticeships since their inception. The graduate apprenticeship has been one way in which the University has been able to extend both the numbers of companies it interacts with as well as deepening long-established relationships. The University was one of the first to deliver graduate apprenticeships and continues to be one of the largest providers of such apprenticeships. Since their inception, the University has worked with over 200 companies from large multinationals to SMEs across a broad range of economic sectors to deliver seven courses to 352 apprentices. The flexible online delivery of the University's apprenticeship courses has further enabled the university to extend the reach of its courses to those who might otherwise not have the opportunity to gain a degree.

³ This relates to the national performance measure 1 in the Outcome Agreement and information is drawn from the most recent publication by the Scottish Funding Council on Articulation from Scottish Colleges to Universities in April 2019.

- Upskilling and short course provision – the University has a developed suite of on-campus and online short courses which it is further developing. The University experienced exceptionally strong demand for its SFC Upskilling courses and could have filled its courses twice over. This has led to the launch of a new suite of micro-learning: Knowledge Bites for Business, harnessing the University’s expertise in e-learning.

One of the undisputed strengths of the Scottish tertiary education sector is the diversity of mission and principle of parity of esteem. Policy should be courageous in reinforcing this principle, all the more so at this time to avoid duplication of effort and inefficient allocation of resource. Funding streams, therefore, should allow institutions to play to their respective strengths. The diversity of our institutions provides students with choice. Students seek institutions that will provide an environment in which they feel comfortable and in which they believe they will be supported and enabled best to succeed. Given sector-wide data on retention, satisfaction, graduate numbers and employability, students in universities with different missions achieve equally good ends. With this consideration in mind, it is a strength of the system that many regions in Scotland have universities with different missions located within them. Given the strengths listed above the University urges strongly that these existing mechanisms be used to support universities in delivering impact to aid economic and social recovery, rather than diverting resource to initiate new programmes of activity with uncertain benefits.

As major civic institutions with extensive and deep roots in their regions, universities must recognise the local and regional environments in which they operate. With this in mind there is a danger that aspects of current policy and its application in the context of Outcome Agreement targets will create aspects of homogeneity in provision rather than recognising institutional diversity. For the University this is most prominent in regard to the target that all institutions should reach a 10% target for SIMD20 enrolments. RGU regularly recruits a significant proportion of MD20 students from within the region and is one of the largest recruiters of MD20 students from outwith our home region. The University has continued, year on year, to enhance and refine its outreach activity to MD20 students, and annually recruits over 100 such students, significantly more than some other universities that have reached a 10% participation target. Internal analysis, already shared with the SFC, demonstrates the difficulty in achieving this target as a result of a very small amount of MD20 areas within the region, lower educational attainment at SQCF Higher regionally and increasing competition driven in part by the outcome agreement process.⁴

The University acknowledges the funding environment is exceptionally challenging and welcomes the announcement by the Scottish Government that the funding currently associated

⁴ Considering a scenario with zero net migration to and from MD20 areas within the region, the University’s MD20 quota would necessitate recruiting almost every 17-21-year-old in Aberdeenshire each year (projections from the Scottish Government data suggest that there will be c.245-255 17-21 year olds living in MD20 areas with Aberdeenshire each year between 2021 and 2023). Even with Aberdeen City included, the University’s MD20 target would require the university to obtain almost a quarter (23%) of all 17-21-year-olds within the City and Shire in 2021 (projection suggest there will be approximately 1028 17-21-year-olds living in such areas within the region in 2021). This figure does not include the fact that the proportion of those from MD20 areas in Aberdeen City and Shire obtaining at least 1 SCQF level 6 qualification (or better) is significantly lower than the national average (32% vs. 43%). Therefore, with such a small MD20 population and one with lower attainment average compared the national figure, it is no surprise that in 2017/18, MD20 students from Aberdeen City and Shire only made up 2% of the total number of such students entering full time, undergraduate courses at Scottish universities (HESA student record data 2017/18).

with EU student fees should remain within the higher education sector. In the interest of social and economic recovery the University supports this funding remaining as part of the teaching grant to support the teaching unit of resource and to ensure that graduate apprenticeships and upskilling courses can be sustained and where there is demand, expanded.

2. *What do you think colleges, universities and specialist institutions should stop doing, or do differently, in order to contribute effectively to an inclusive social and economic recovery? (You may wish to comment on teaching and skills development, sectoral and employer needs and employability, research, innovation and knowledge exchange, widening access and equalities issues.)*

Rather than dwell on what the sector might stop doing, this section is focused on how activity might be undertaken differently. As mentioned above, the funding released by no longer recognising EU students as having fundable status provides opportunities to focus resources on particular aspects of provision of teaching and learning which can promote an inclusive social and economic recovery. These include:

- Apprenticeship family – significant attention has been paid to developing a seamless learner journey from school to college and onward to university. Now a similar focus should be applied to the apprenticeship family to ensure a seamless progress through the different apprenticeship levels. This must allow apprentices to remain in the workforce while learning and upskilling. It would enable the continued funding and possible expansion of graduate apprenticeships currently funded through EU funding (which we have earlier indicated could be funding through a repurposing of the funding currently attached to EU students). Such a focus on the apprenticeship journey should consider the introduction of postgraduate apprenticeships that will prepare employees to be leaders in the business, public and third sector.
- Work-based upskilling and reskilling – developing the activity underway within parts of the university sector to provide graduate apprenticeships, there is an opportunity to shift the focus of funded activity from undergraduate entry to university, to streams that incentivise and support work-based, lifelong learning enabling increased productivity in the economy. This should meet a need to tackle identifiable and significant economic challenges (for instance around digital skills) rather than providing training for training's sake. It should be work-based not merely to reduce burdens on companies but to ensure it can be provided now, as opposed to waiting until universities are able to address space constraints arising from social distancing requirements. It is in the national interest to support continuous upskilling in the workforce and given that 98% of companies based in Scotland are SMEs, it is not reasonable to assume this burden of cost should fall solely on the employer. Given the economic downturn likely as a result of the pandemic, neither can society necessarily expect employees to be able to afford their retraining or upskilling costs. In the short-term, given the effects of the pandemic on business revenues, for many employers even an expectation of a financial contribution for such schemes may not be practicable, although non-financial matched costs could be sought similar as for KTPs.
- Support the expansion of widening access to university – the changes in eligibility of EU students for funded places enables an opportunity to widen access amongst Scottish students to higher education. This could be done without disadvantaging those who currently gain admission to university (sometimes termed the "squeezed middle") and within the existing funded places allocated to individual universities. In any implementation of this policy, it ought to be recognised that the challenges of widening

access involve many different student characteristics such as gender, disability, ethnicity as well as socio-economic background. While the maintenance of funded places within institutions can allow for greater participation this will not be fully enabled without significant changes to the attainment rates of such students at earlier stages of education.

More generally given the spectre of mass unemployment as a result of a recession, consideration might be given to the possibility of individuals become re-eligible for SAAS funding (and thereby allocation of SFC teaching grant) to enable them take up of reskilling through undergraduate courses which facilitate a change of career. In practice, this might mean that individuals become re-eligible for SAAS support for a professional-relevant course, after ten years in employment and/or a year of unemployment.⁵

3. How can colleges, universities and specialist institutions best support Scotland's international connectedness and competitiveness in the post-pandemic, post-EU membership environment?

The University has nothing to add to this question beyond that articulated within the Universities Scotland submission.

4. What opportunities and threats does the post-pandemic environment hold for colleges, universities and specialist institutions? For institutional leaders, how are you planning to address these challenges and opportunities?

The University moved with considerable agility and speed to ensure it could continue to delivery teaching and assessment. The routine widespread deployment of the University's virtual learning environment to improve the student experience and extensive staff experience of teaching online courses enabled this transition. Within the University this meant that, following an initial pause of one week, all teaching resumed online and uniquely in the sector remote assessments at all stages of courses were arranged and completed successfully. In the case of both Gray's School of Art and Scott Sutherland School of Architecture this meant moving the entire annual degree show for our final year students to a virtual showcase of their exceptional talent.⁶ Close communication with the Students' Union and the general student body from the very first risk of lockdown being muted has ensured that the support provided to learners to continue their course rather than experience any abrupt and premature end of the academic year. This experience has proved invaluable in planning for a potentially reduced level of contact time on campus for the University's courses over the first part of the coming academic session. It is recognised that school leavers entering university this year will not have sat formal exams and ended their courses earlier than usual this, coupled with the additional pressures faced by the pandemic, will require a different type of academic and non-academic support for students in the coming year.

This significant expertise in online learning was also deployed to deliver the suite of courses funded through this year's allocation to the University of the Funding Council's upskilling fund. Demand for such courses has been strongly evidenced by the fact that the University was able

⁵ A similar scheme is already operated by SAAS: individuals seeking ordination in the Church of Scotland are eligible for support to undertake a further course of undergraduate study (in this instance a Bachelor of Divinity degree).

⁶ The Gray's Degree Show is available at the following link: <https://www.graysdegree.show/welcome>; The Architecture Show is available at the following link: <https://www.drawn-north.co.uk/>.

to fill the places within days of them opening for applications and could have filled the courses over again. This experience of developing demand-led short courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels is actively informing the University's development of wider short course provision. There is a need for refreshed skills assessments both at a sector and regional level and funding streams need to respond to this demand rather the courses which can most readily be supplied by providers, whether colleges, universities or private sector training providers.

A significant concern for the University in its mission to support the its region is the impact that the pandemic has had on the global demand for oil and gas and the effect on the economy of Aberdeen City and Shire. This has occurred at a time when the region was commencing the energy transition which will play a significant part in ensuring as the economy recovers and demand for oil and gas returns that the region makes a strong contribution to addressing the climate emergency. The downturn currently being experienced will likely lead to significant unemployment within the region and the urgent need to upskill and/or reskill individuals. While this presents an opportunity for the University, the financial pressures on these individuals may affect their ability to afford such courses. With this in mind such courses require heavy or complete subsidy and is a further reason why this submission recommends a relaxation of eligibility for SAAS support.

The most significant threat to institutional sustainability relates to tuition fee revenues and uncertainties in regard to the ability of international students to enter the UK safely with relative ease. The University has a strong – indeed, notwithstanding the pandemic, an increasing – pipeline of international applicants for entry into the 2020/21 academic session. The University's ability to limit losses over the coming academic sessions depends upon resolution of a logistical challenging of hundreds of individuals being able to move from their home country to Aberdeen. Support at a national and sector level to address this logistical challenge will be required while restrictions associated with travel remain in place. Without it, universities' ability to maximise their contribution to any social and economic recovery will be weakened significantly. In the medium-term, the sector will require support to ensure that Scotland remains a positive and welcoming destination for study.

The University welcomes the Funding Council's announcement that over the coming academic year the usual rules around clawback of funding for under-recruitment will be suspended. In recognising this as being of practical assistance to institutional sustainability during this period of potentially extraordinary turbulence in domestic student demand, it would be helpful if the Funding Council could extend this relaxation to all academic sessions where entry decisions are affected by the on-going pandemic. Furthermore, under-recruitment in the coming year will have an effect on a university's funded places not only for that single year but for subsequent years. It would be beneficial to extend any relaxation to all years affected by pandemic-related turbulence in student demand. In the same vein it would assist institutional sustainability if the funding associated with graduate apprenticeships from Skills Development Scotland had similar relaxations applied to it.

5. What forms of collaboration within the tertiary education eco-system would best enable a coherent and effective response to these challenges and opportunities?

Three mechanisms of collaboration will assist develop an effective response to the challenges and opportunities outlined above.

- College-university partnerships – many universities already work in a collaborative and supportive manner together through curriculum alignment. Over the last decade this has enabled a large expansion of articulation with advanced standing across the sector. There are dangers that a pursuit of homogeneity across the universities sector through national performance measures introduces disruptive competition for enrolments of “articulating students”. This unnecessary competition prevents existing strong partnerships from developing further and partners working in tandem to jointly articulate their offering to those in primary and secondary education (thus addressing issues of subject choice) and developing joint provision to support upskilling and reskilling of the workforce.
- Research collaboration through pooling – research pooling and Scotland’s innovation centre programme have both been successful and should be sustained. The Funding Council should follow-up on the independent reviews of both initiatives.
- University-business interaction – collaboration between universities and business has been strengthened by graduate apprenticeships, innovation vouchers (Interface), KTPs (Innovate UK), the innovation centres and the overarching university innovation framework and associated funding streams. These should be seen as the building blocks to further developments to enable universities make a significant contribution to economic productivity. From discussions with our industry and regional economic development partners it is clear that there is a range of activity that is needed to support the opportunity to pivot to new markets, optimise supply chains, improve use of technology through digital infrastructure and e-commerce. There are clear opportunities here for the provision of targeted upskilling short courses in addition to the existing mechanisms mentioned at the start of this paragraph. There is no requirement to invent new mechanisms for engagement, instead sustain those that are working.

6. *How can SFC, alongside government and other enterprise, skills and education-focused agencies, best support colleges, universities and specialist institutions to make their full contribution to Scotland’s inclusive, green and education-led recovery? In particular, you may wish to draw out:*

- *How scarce public resources should be prioritised to drive recovery*
- *Particular areas of collaboration between agencies that would best support the sectors’ contributions*
- *Adaptations to SFC’s funding and accountability frameworks to promote agile and collaborative action by the sectors to build Scotland’s recovery*
- *How SFC’s funding and accountability frameworks should ensure that equality and wide access to educational opportunity are promoted as key elements of the recovery for younger people and adults*
- *What support SFC and government could give institutions to adapt to a changed environment*

The most significant support that could be provided to universities would be a collaborative and joined up approach by all the Enterprise and Skills agencies in their dealings with, and approaches to, institutions. It is important that the policy and funding framework that is established to support social and economic recovery is developed in common across all these agencies with the Scottish Funding Council having a lead responsibility. It is equally important that to maximise the tertiary sectors’ contribution to social and economic recovery, clear and reliable information on workforce and business needs for skills is provided to the sector. As mentioned earlier in this submission, one of the undisputed strengths of the Scottish tertiary

education sector is diversity of mission within the sector and the principle of parity of esteem. Policy should be courageous in reinforcing this principle, all the more so at this time to avoid duplication of effort and inefficient allocation of resource. Funding streams, therefore, ought to support this principle and allow institutions to play to their respective strengths.

Earlier in this submission, the University has articulated a number of suggestions, including:

- Monies released from the funding arrangements of EU students post-Brexit should remain allocated to the university teaching grant of the Funding Council and that the current allocation of funded places to universities should remain static.
- The University has made suggestions regarding the use of such funded places to (i) maintain and, if desirable, expand the provision of graduate apprenticeships, (ii) support upskilling and reskilling short courses; and (iii) expand the widening access commitments made by universities (to more explicitly cover a wider range of protected characteristics as well as socio-economic background).
- The importance of demand-led professionally relevant education being prioritised for funding – potentially through the relaxation of current SAAS rules around eligibility for support.
- The University asks the Funding Council to relax its uncompromising position of applying national targets to all institutions (most notably, national performance measure 2) irrespective of their regional circumstances. This application of national targets to all institutions and the lack of appreciation of the key regional role of universities within the process will lead to what is presumed to be an unintended homogenising effect on the sector.
- That Scottish tertiary education policy, its implementation and associated funding frameworks, should be guided by the principle of parity of esteem and recognition of institutional diversity. Specifically, that it is not the number of new college and universities partnerships but rather the strengthen and depth of existing partnerships that will achieve coherent provision across the sectors for the benefit of learners and employers.
- Support to continue to position Scotland as an attractive and welcoming destination for international students to study and make subsequent contributions to the Scotland's society, culture and economy.
- The need to apply thinking behind the seamless learner journey to the apprenticeship family.
- Research within Scotland should continue to be recognised as a fundamental characteristic of a university. While this remains the case, the funding of research excellence wherever it is found is a principle that should be retained.
- The existing mechanisms to support university-business interaction need to be sustained rather than invent new mechanisms for engagement.